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WOMEN AND THE TRADE-UNION MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

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THE story of woman in the labor movement has yet to be written. In its completeness no one knows the story, and those who know sections of it most intimately are too busy living their own parts in that story to be able to pause long enough to play at being its chroniclers. For to be part of a movement is more absorbing than to write about it. Whom then shall we ask? To whom shall we turn for even an imperfect knowledge of the story, at once great and sordid, tragic and commonplace, of woman's side of the labor movement? To whom, you would say, but the worker herself? And where does the worker speak with such clearness, such unfaltering steadiness, as through her union, the organization of her trade?

In the industrial maze the individual worker cannot interpret her own life story from her knowledge of the little patch of life which is all her hurried fingers ever touch. Only an organization can be the interpreter here. Fortunately for the student the organization can act as interpreter, both for the organized women who have been drawn into the labor movement and for those less fortunate who are struggling on single-handed. Organized and unorganized workers almost always come into pretty close relations in one way and another. Besides, the movement in its modern developments is still so young among us that there is scarcely a woman worker in the organizations who has not begun her trade life as an unorganized toiler.

Speaking broadly, the points upon which the trade-union movement concentrates are the raising of wages, the shortening of hours, the diminution of seasonal work, the abolition or reduction of piece work, with its resultant of speeding-up, the maintaining of sanitary conditions, the enforcement of laws against child labor and other industrial abuses, the abolition of

taxes for power, thread and needles, and of unfair fines for petty or unproved offenses. A single case taken from a non-union trade must serve to suggest the conditions that make organization a necessity. Seventeen years ago in the bag and hemp factories of St. Louis, girl experts turned out 460 yards of material in a twelve-hour day, the pay being 24 cents per bolt (of from 60 to 66 yards). These girls earned \$1.84 per day (on the 60-yard bolt). Now a girl cannot hold her job under a thousand yards in a ten-hour day. The fastest possible worker can turn out only 1200 yards, and the price has dropped to 15 cents per 100 yards as against the old rate of 24 cents per bolt of from 60 to 66 yards. The workers have to fill the shuttle every two or three minutes, so that the strain of vigilance is never relaxed. One year is spent in learning the trade, and operators last only three years after that.

How successful organization has been is well shown by numerous examples. In the instances which follow, taken from the convention handbook of the National Woman's Trade Union League, the advantages gained in some of the trades apply to all establishments working under agreement with any and every local union of the national organization. In other cases the diminution of hours, the increase of wages and the improvement of conditions are limited to the factories or shops in certain cities only. Even bearing this qualification in mind, these gains, following in the train of collective bargaining, are sufficiently impressive.

SEWING TRADES

In the sewing trades there are many sub-divisions, including such varied groups of workers as these: home finishers, coat makers, pants makers, vest makers, shirt, collar and cuff makers, overall makers, white goods workers, corset makers, shirtwaist makers, skirt makers, cloak and suit tailors, button-hole makers, lace makers and embroiderers. All employed in these occupations can belong to one of the two great national unions, the United Garment Workers of America and the International Ladies' Garment Workers. Wherever these unions control the trade they have abolished child labor, have established the eight-hour day and in some cities the forty-four-hour

week, have insisted upon sanitary conditions, and have obtained time and a half in wages for overtime work. The general wage has been increased over fifty %.

GLOVE WORKERS

In this trade the union has abolished the practice of compelling a girl to pay for her sewing machine (perhaps \$60 for a \$35 machine) or else to rent it at 50 cents a week. Under non-union conditions she has to buy her own needles and oil, pay 40 cents a week for power, and stand the cost of all breakages. The organization has abolished all these causes of complaint, has reduced hours from twelve to nine and eight and a half, and has established a Saturday half holiday. This union has been very successful in eliminating the pacemaker as a factor in controlling the price of piece work, for the price is now determined by the speed of the average worker, not the fastest one.

BOOT AND SHOE WORKERS

Here the union has increased wages by 40 %. Unionized women shoe workers are entitled when sick to \$5 a week benefit for thirteen weeks in one year. There is also a death benefit of \$50, after six months' membership, and \$100 after a two years' membership. All members are entitled to \$4 a week strike pay.

LAUNDRY WORKERS

In one city organization has reduced the hours of work from eighteen and twelve (in the rush season) to nine, and has increased wages 50 %. In another city the union has reduced the hours of work from eighteen and twelve to nine, and has increased wages from \$15 a month to \$9 a week minimum and \$15 a week average.

BEER BOTTLERS

The work done by women and girls in breweries involves standing all day. If they are washers they cannot keep themselves dry, and in winter the open doors keep the great bottling rooms very cold. Broken glass and exploding bottles are constantly injuring the faces and cutting the hands of both washers and labelers. In Chicago organization has reduced the hours

from nine to eight. The wages run from \$3.50 to \$5.50 in non-unionized establishments. In one city where the girls are unionized they are paid \$7.20 a week and overtime at the rate of time and a half. Among men this is a highly unionized trade; consequently girls ought everywhere to have the protection of a common organization.

CIGAR MAKERS

There is a great contrast between union factories and some non-union establishments. The union has successfully insisted upon good ventilation, clean floors, walls and toilets, clean paste in little individual jars (to fasten the ends of the cigars), an eight-hour day and no child labor. Among all cigar makers the death rate from tuberculosis is 61 % of all deaths, according to government statistics. Among union cigar makers according to the last obtainable report (1905) the tuberculosis death rate was only 24 %.

ELECTRICAL WORKERS

The electrical workers' trade is one into which women are coming in increasing numbers because, as one foreman said, they receive 40 % less wages than men and do 25 % more work. This trade is a long way yet from the ideal of equal pay for equal work, but the union established for the girls a minimum wage scale of \$5 a week at the very first, and last year this was increased to \$6. Hours have been cut from ten a day to eight and a half on five days of the week and four and a half on Saturday.

BINDERY WOMEN

It would be vain for an individual girl to go to the foreman or the manager in a bindery and refuse to use bronze powder for lettering because it is deadly to the lungs, or to explain that for a girl to work on a numbering machine with her foot at the rate of 25,000 impressions a day is dangerous to her health. But this is just what the locals of bindery women through their delegates are explaining to employers the country over, and employers are heeding them. These organized girls have an eight-hour day and wages have increased by 35 and even 50 %. Sick members get a \$3 benefit for thirteen weeks, and at death a benefit of \$50 is paid.

TEACHERS

The teachers of Chicago in the year 1902 could look forward to a maximum salary in the primary grades of \$800, in the grammar grades of \$825. The efforts of their organization, the Teachers' Federation, have raised the maximum salary in the primary grades to \$1,075 and in the grammar grades to \$1,100, an increase of \$275. The money to meet this additional expense has been found for the board of education through the successful tax suit promoted by the Teachers' Federation itself. Teachers' pensions are now on a solid basis. The pension fund is supported by contributions, with a small addition from the public funds. The fact of having this small addition, whose validity has been passed upon by the courts, establishes the right of the public school teacher to a pension from public funds.

MUSICIANS.

The American Federation of Musicians has greatly improved conditions for its membership, which includes women. A non-union player at a dance gets from \$2 to \$4 a night and may have to play until daylight. Not so union players. They can ask \$6 until 2 a. m. and \$1 for every hour thereafter. The Chicago and St. Louis locals have established regulation uniforms for their members, which is a great economy.

VAUDEVILLE ARTISTS.

Vaudeville actresses have to be grateful for the safer and more decent conditions which their mixed union has brought to them. Separate and sanitary dressing rooms are now to be found in the unionized five and ten-cent theaters in Chicago. An act which formerly might have had to be repeated fifteen times, cannot be asked for more than eight times on a holiday and four times on other days.

WAITRESSES.

Unorganized waitresses often have to work seven days a week and sometimes fourteen hours a day; they have to provide their own uniform and pay for its laundering. Organized waitresses have a ten-hour day and a six-day week. Their wages have risen from \$5 and \$6 to \$7 and \$8 per week and meals. Their

uniforms and laundry expenses are found for them. They enjoy a \$3 sick benefit for thirteen weeks and the union pays a \$50 death benefit.

There are some trades which have been organized and which yet record thus far no marked improvement in the condition of the workers. This may be either because the organization has been in existence too short a time or because of other reasons. Among such trades are sheepskin workers, badge, banner and regalia workers, human hair workers and commercial telegraphers. Even in these trades steady educational and organizing work is proceeding. Moreover the union may have been an influence preventing further wage cutting, higher speeding up or the imposition of more overtime.

The trade union is the great school for working girls. There they are taught the principles of collective bargaining. They learn to discuss difficulties with employers, free from the rasping sense of personal grievance. They learn to give and take with equanimity, to balance a greater advantage against a lesser one. In union meetings and conferences where they meet on an equality with their brothers it is the girl of sober judgment, good humor and ready wit who becomes a leader, and influences her more inexperienced sister to follow her.

The trade union is educating the community as well as the girl. There is a growing tendency among men and women of the teaching, clerical and other non-manual occupations to recognize the common interest of all workers, and to form under one name or another associations to affiliate with the labor movement. One of the largest of these is the Teachers' Federation of Chicago which has now been many years in existence. More recently stenographers' and typists' associations have been formed in New York and Chicago. The formation of actors' and musicians' associations is additional proof of the same spirit.

The influence upon the whole community of organized insistence upon human conditions for the worker is marked. Trade-union standards tend eventually to become the standards toward which all non-union establishments that claim to treat their employees well voluntarily approximate. Trade-union standards are the standards up to which decent non-union em-

employers keep steadily inching along in respect to hours and conditions of work, and often even in respect to that most crucial test of all, wages. Trade-union standards are, in short, always tending to become in the eyes of the public the normal standards in the whole world of industry. Indeed everywhere the paradox is to be noticed that the non-union girl benefits remarkably as the result of the existence of a union in her trade. Under pressure of competition employers frequently state that their trade will not bear shorter hours or higher wages. Curiously enough, such statements are much more frequently made in unorganized than organized trades, and the employers more frequently act up to their statements.

Unions, furthermore, have an important indirect influence on legislation. In trade after trade, the benefits of shorter hours have been gained through organization in states where there was no legislation and no prospect of it. This is seen in many branches of the garment-making industry, among waitresses, tobacco strippers, printers and bindery women all over the United States. A ten-hour day, a nine-hour day, an eight-hour day, even a forty-four-hour week, for different bodies of these workers, have been for them the fruits of organization. These advantages gained, the evidence of workers who enjoy shorter hours and the experience of employers who conduct their establishments under a system of shorter hours form the strongest and most practical argument by which legislators are influenced to consider the practicability and desirability of the shorter working day.

Trade unions, indeed, cannot beat back the ocean, though they have been known to think they could. They cannot raise wages beyond certain limits, though the obstacles that bar further upward movement in a particular trade may be quite beyond the ken of the wisest in or out of the labor movement. They cannot always prevent wages from falling, whether that fall be expressed in actual cash or measured in purchasing power. International competition, the introduction of machinery, or the opening of fresh reservoirs of cheaper foreign labor may press wages down with irresistible force.

But more and more unions ought to be able to lessen the cruel

abruptness with which such changes fall upon the worker. By no known means can the action of economic forces be prevented, but their incidence can and should be altered.

Under our present chaotic no-system every mechanical improvement, every migration of population, the entrance of women into trades followed by men, or even the paltriest change of fashion in shirtwaists or hatpins, may bring in its train frightful suffering and destruction of life and all that makes life valuable, instead of a peaceful shifting of workers and re-alloting of tasks. All this might be largely prevented. The right of the worker, for instance, to demand notice when any great alteration in a factory process is impending would in itself do much to make adjustment to social changes smooth and relatively easy. Great suffering unquestionably resulted from the introduction of the linotype, but it was nothing to what would have been but for the fact that the printers were a strongly organized body and were able to make conditions with employers when the machine was first introduced. What the printers were able to do on a small scale the organized labor movement ought to be able to do for all workers.

On another side, moreover, the woman trade unionist comes up against a dead wall. No matter what her standing in her union, no matter how justly and fairly she be treated by her men fellow workers in the labor movement, the fact remains that she is not a voter. One hand is tied. Till she has the vote she can not as a member of the union have the same influence upon its policies as if she were a man and a voter, nor outside can her services be of the same value to the union as if she were enfranchised.

As regards her special needs as a woman, her organization does not speak for her, nor can she insist that it shall speak for her as it would do if she were a man. For instance, badly as striking men are often treated at the hands of the courts, striking women fare worse. It was not a trade unionist but a suffragist, Mrs. Rachel Foster Avery, who drew attention to the widely different treatment meted out to the striking chauffeurs and the striking shirtwaist makers in New York City, where the offenses with which the women were charged were far more trivial than

those of which the men were accused. Whether it is in an industrial dispute, in the legislature, or in the courts, that woman is struggling for what she considers her rights, it is always political weapons which in the last resort are turned against her, and she stands helpless, for she has no political weapon wherewith she may defend herself and press her claim to attention.

If the trade union be the only audible voice of the worker in any trade, the association of women's unions known as the National Women's Trade Union League is the expression of the women's side of the whole trade-union movement of the United States. It has taken up the special work of organization among women undistracted by the much larger mass of general field work that falls to men. The idea of the league originated with William English Walling, who got the suggestion from observation of the working of the British Women's Trade Union League. Their plan was adapted to suit American conditions. The American league is a federation of women's trade unions, which admits also organizations such as clubs and societies declaring themselves in sympathy with the cause of labor. It has also a large individual membership composed of trade unionists (men and women) and of other sympathizers. In this broad basis of membership lies its strength. It links into bonds of active practical endeavor after better conditions persons in every class of society, while any tendency to slip into unreal or unpractical methods is checked by the provision that on all boards whether national or local a majority of the members must always be trade-unionist women.

The league platform demands:

1. Organization of all workers into trade unions.
2. Equal pay for equal work.
3. An eight-hour day.
4. A minimum wage scale.
5. Full citizenship for women.
6. All principles involved in the economic program of the American Federation of Labor.

In both its national and its local organizations the league spends much of its energy in the adjustment of labor difficulties among women workers, in giving active assistance in time

of strikes and in presenting actual industrial conditions through lectures and literature to universities, churches, clubs and trade unions. It presses home the increasing dangers of industrial overstrain on the health of women, the necessity for collective bargaining, wise labor legislation and full citizenship for women. Through its membership, representing many thousands of working women, the league is able to obtain for the use of social workers, investigators and students actual first-hand information regarding the dangers of wrong industrial conditions.

The reasons why such an organization must be more elastic than a body like the American Federation of Labor, is because of the very different relation in which women stand to organized industry. The connection of the great bulk of women with their trade is not permanent. Seven years is the average duration of women's wage-earning life. The average woman unionist is a mere girl. An organization of men, in which mature men are the leaders and in which the rank and file join for life, has a solidity and permanence which unaided groups of young girls, groups with membership necessarily fluctuating, can never achieve.

What more right and fitting then that the maternal principle in the community as represented by the motherhood of the country should ally itself with this movement in support of good conditions and happy lives for the future mothers of the country? This is strikingly put in Mrs. Raymond Robins' address as president at the second biennial convention of the National Women's Trade Union League: "It has happily fallen to the lot of the Women's Trade Union League to have charge and supervision of the kindergarten department in the great school of organized labor. It is for this reason that music and merry-making is so essential a feature of our league work, with books and story telling and all that makes for color and music and laughter and that leads to essential human fellowship—a sure foundation for the industrial union of our younger sisters. We know that we need them; they will later know how greatly they needed us."